

PREFACE

The corporate grip on opinion in the United States is one of the wonders of the Western world. No First World country has ever managed to eliminate so entirely from its media all objectivity - much less dissent.

~ Gore Vidal

What is particularly naïve and peculiarly vicious about the conservative behavioral outlook is that it tends to deny the lingering effect of black history—a history inseparable from though not reducible to victimization. In this way, crucial and indispensable themes of self-help and personal responsibility are wrenched out of historical context and contemporary circumstances—as if it is all just a matter of personal will.

~ Cornel West

The report you are reading comes about through my participation on the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina as a “guest,” since the Leadership of the Democratic Party chose to boycott the process. The Select Committee’s Final Report calls this approach self-defeating, “given that the Select Committee’s composition and minority subpoena authority would have given the Democrats more clout than they enjoy on any standing committee of the House.” I chose to get my foot in the door on this Committee because I knew that time was urgent for the hurricane survivors, who needed our help and our answers, and who also needed to connect with Congress. In that spirit, I urged the Committee to take the time to listen directly to some of the hurricane survivors. I also did not concur with Members on my side of the aisle who were or are holding out for an investigation by an independent commission along the lines of the deeply flawed 9/11 Commission.¹

In its Report the Select Committee expresses its gratitude for the participation of minority members, including myself. In return, I wish to express my gratitude to the Committee Members, the Committee Staff and especially to Chairman Tom Davis for creating an atmosphere of constructive dialogue, for taking the effort to arrange for a Congressional Delegation to the Gulf Coast on January 19th and 20th, and in particular for agreeing to hold a special hearing at my request. At that hearing on December 6th, we heard directly from some people who rarely get the opportunity to speak to Congress and the American people. Some of their personal testimonials were shocking and disturbing, and that is precisely why I believe that they needed to be heard. I thank the Members and Guests for taking the time to listen. From this I take away some hope, for the spirit of a representative democracy can only be sustained through a constant dialogue between citizens and their elected officials.

Finally, I wish to express to Representatives Jefferson and Melancon of Louisiana, and Representative Taylor of Mississippi, my appreciation for their involvement in the Committee. While I have been engaged with the problems faced by thousands of evacuees now reside in the fourth district of Georgia, I can only imagine the enormity of the political as well as emotional

challenge faced by those dealing directly with the aftermath of the greatest natural disaster in our nation's history.

Government failed the people of the Gulf Coast. That appears to be the overriding theme of the Report. It is not something we did not know. We all saw it on our television screens. But the Report of the Select Committee is stunning for presenting us with a laundry list of failures. This must be qualified, of course, to acknowledge two major successes of government in this catastrophe. First, the largest pre-storm evacuation in our nation's history went off splendidly well for the millions who had the means to evacuate. Second is the heroic performance of first responders, the Coast Guard in particular, in rescuing tens of thousands of residents stranded in their homes. Their courage and dedication is truly to be commended.

Yet putting these two successes together, we immediately see that because the evacuation plan simply did not encompass those without their own means to evacuate, namely those living near or below the poverty line, without this major failing of an otherwise stunningly successful plan, there would not have been such an urgent need for rescue teams to conduct their daring feats of bravery.

The greater failure was the government's delayed and confused response. In general, poor coordination, poor planning and execution, and inadequate efforts at communication are cited in the Select Committee Report as causes of this failure. On its own terms, the Report also does a fair job of balancing, on the one hand, the fact that Hurricane Katrina simply overwhelmed existing capacity of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), as well as relief organizations such as the Red Cross to cope with the scale of the catastrophe, with the overall inadequacy of preparation and planning.

Even more pointed is the Committee's conclusion that the lessons learned from the "Hurricane Pam" planning and preparedness exercise conducted in July 2004 were not applied to the response to Hurricane Katrina. The Hurricane Pam exercise was specifically designed to develop planning and response to a catastrophic hurricane hitting the Louisiana coast. It anticipated a scenario even worse than what actually happened before and after Hurricane Katrina. Given "Pam's striking resemblance to Katrina in force and devastation," the Report concludes, "many have been left wondering at the failure to anticipate, and plan for...essentials." Going back further, at a recent press conference, David Walker, Comptroller and head of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated that the GAO had made recommendations in the wake of hurricane Andrew in 1992, and that to date most of those recommendations had not been followed up on.²

After so many tens of billions of dollars have been spent in establishing and maintaining a new super-agency, the Department of Homeland Security, attentive Americans must ask not only how such a stunning failure of government response to a natural disaster is possible, but also how it is possible that in the process of expending vast sums on new bureaucratic infrastructure charged with enhancing our safety we now learn that lessons of the past were ignored in a way that led directly to the scenario of the present failure. The Committee's Report offers at least a large part of the answer when it points repeatedly to a failure to take initiative, which can easily be interpreted as a failure of leadership. As we read in the Report:

...a dispassionate review made it clear that even an extraordinary lack of situational awareness could not excuse the feckless, flailing, and organizational paralysis evident in the documents and communications the Committee reviewed.

Leadership requires decisions to be made even when based on flawed and incomplete information. Too often during the immediate response to Katrina, sparse or conflicting information was used as an excuse for inaction rather than an imperative to step in and fill an obvious vacuum.

This brings us to the content of the present report. Surprising as the quote above may be, coming from the Majority Party, it remains in keeping with the overall approach of many previous investigations into government failures, because it seeks to address the problem in predominantly bureaucratic terms. Over the years, there has been an almost cyclical pattern of crises or scandals followed by investigations that point out failures, followed by calls for bureaucratic reform.³ Just as the 9/11 Commission called for a new czar to fight terrorism and got it, the call has already gone out in response to the failure of Hurricane Katrina for the selection of a right-hand man or woman to be the President's point person in coordinating natural disasters.⁴ Yet it becomes clear as we proceed that the Secretary of Homeland Security had this authority and failed to exercise it in this disaster.

In this report we are less interested in engaging in a debate about what bureaucratic reforms are needed to fix the problem for the future than we are in addressing areas of omission in the Select Committee Report. In general, the Select Committee Report does not seem to acknowledge the full ramifications of Hurricane Katrina, and the way in which it represents a watershed moment for our nation. The testimony taken by the Select Committee was overwhelmingly from public officials, and this gave undue place to issues of personal and bureaucratic success or failure. The hearings took place during a period of intense confusion and agony for displaced survivors, who often spoke of bewilderment at the *ongoing* failure of the government to act. Moreover, while the Report cites agencies at all levels of government for failure, it generally omits the failure of *the White House or Congress* to respond to the long-term crisis which, collectively, Hurricane Katrina, the levee failures, and the inadequate response have spawned.

The death toll from Katrina stands at over 1,300. But the more astonishing figure is the number of missing, which varies between 3,000 and 6,600 souls, depending upon the source. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about 500,000 people, including survivors and those who came to their rescue, may need mental health services.⁵ The term "Katrina Stress" has become current, and the level of suicide among survivors is reportedly very high. Calls to the National Suicide Prevention hot line more than doubled in September of 2005,⁶ and have stayed high.

Tens of thousands of evacuees living in hotels and motels with their accommodations provided by FEMA face eviction on March 1, 2006. Many have already been evicted. Attorneys for the Lawyers' Committee on Civil Rights have expressed concern that unless urgent action is taken, we may soon see a new class of "Katrina Homeless" in America.

The current and pressing issues of ensuring or restoring survivors with their basic rights of access to housing, education, voting and the right of return may sit outside the narrow window of the ten days before and after the storm that the Select Committee was charged with investigating, but this should count as a major omission, for our government continues to fail the survivors, and at points in this report we will be stepping outside the box, as it were.

In a recent speech, President George W. Bush spoke of how reconstruction of the Gulf “would provide a ‘fantastic opportunity’ for private businesses and investment. ‘There is going to be a building boom down here. It’s going to be an exciting time,’ he said. Bush suggested that the \$85 billion in assistance already pledged by the Federal Government was sufficient. He added: “‘I’m sure there’s still concern about the future, but the eyes have cleared up’”⁷ To suggest that none are still crying or in pain is an insult to the dignity of the survivors. A greater insult is the fact that while the Bush Administration seems unwilling to spend the sums necessary to prevent tens of thousands of poor, mostly African-American survivors from being turned out onto the streets, the reconstruction efforts he is excited about involve giving multi-billion dollar, sweetheart, no-bid contracts⁸ to firms like Halliburton, a company currently facing multiple investigations of fraud. For example, a Pentagon audit of the giant firm is now calling into question more than a billion dollars’ worth of the company’s bills in Iraq.⁹ The Select Committee Report steers clear of this scandal. The only conflict of interest involving contractors that is dealt with concerns companies pursuing contracts with both local and federal government at once.

Initially, less than three per cent of contracts went to minority-owned businesses, where the usual minimum was five per cent.¹⁰ In a situation where minority businesses were hurt the worst, and where returning residents needed those contracts to help get their businesses up and running again, the favoritism towards big, outside contractors over local businesses added insult to injury. Harry Alford, President of the National Black Chamber of Commerce, testified before the Select Committee that, as he sees it, Washington has been in bed with a contractors’ cartel since Desert Storm. Having hijacked the contracting process, this cartel controls the distribution of contracts regardless of price, quality or due diligence. Various mechanisms exist to make it too expensive for minority business owners to do business. We have also talked with experts and business owners who complain about the subcontracting system, whereby big companies like Bechtel or EEC get contracts to do cleanup work at between \$24 and \$44 per square yard, but subcontract this out to smaller contractors often hiring minimum wage workers at between \$4 and \$7 per yard. This is far too high a level of overhead to make sense. Additionally, reports indicate that the chain of subcontracting can result in delays of payments for workers, or one case involving Latino immigrant workers, no payment at all.¹¹ Arnold Baker, an African-American business owner in New Orleans, had \$600,000 worth of sand confiscated from his premises by authorities to fix the breaches in the levees. He has yet to receive any promise of reimbursement.¹²

If our government can afford to ignore billions of dollars of waste to corrupt no-bid, sweetheart deal contractors, then certainly whatever the local, state and Federal authorities deem necessary for relief and reconstruction efforts should be supplied by the Federal Government, given its failure to respond adequately, in light of prior warnings.

Another extremely important aspect of Hurricane Katrina that the Select Committee Report effectively ignores is the range of releases of hazardous and toxic materials into the environment along the Gulf Coast. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is basically shrugging off what may turn out to be the biggest environmental disaster in our nation's history. In the shadow of so many other controversies, this issue has received scant attention from any quarter.

Hurricane Katrina represents a watershed moment, as many have observed, because it has forced Americans to confront the taboo on discussions of race and poverty at home. The Select Committee's Report elected not to tangle with these issues in any depth. This supplementary report sees these as two major omissions, and it will begin by addressing them. We will look at these issues through some of the survivors' narratives of being evacuated or detained, including the abysmal state of prison conditions in New Orleans.

In his early work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith suggested that human beings are generally inclined to have great sympathy for those who have suffered great loss because they have fallen from a high to a low social condition, because they can imagine the magnitude of the loss, but are far less inclined to have much sympathy at all for those who, starting in a low position, fall a bit lower. Perhaps this explains how some Americans can be so callous as to travel to New Orleans to take bus tours of the devastated Lower Ninth Ward, without bringing material aid or volunteering to help in the clean-up. And perhaps Smith's observation sheds light on the current plight of survivors.

The issues that were washed ashore by Hurricane Katrina will continue to confront us many years to come. While driving through one neighborhood full of gutted houses after another in New Orleans, or along the Mississippi coast where piles of debris sit where so many old, antebellum houses once stood, or when confronting the harsh plight faced by so many evacuees in temporary and very tenuous housing, it can be easy to become simply overwhelmed at the thought of the task ahead. The work of the Select Committee ends on February 15. The enormous challenge of confronting the issues raised in these reports does not.

Cynthia A. McKinney
Member of Congress
February 6, 2006

Note: The focus of this report is on New Orleans, for reasons that should quickly become apparent to the reader. A broader and more balanced geographical approach was intended, and with more time, could have been achieved.